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NEGRO CUSTOMS AND FOLK-STORIES OF JAMAICA.

NEGROES are known to possess the elements of an extensive literature, and a mass of folk-tales and folk-songs, not inferior in interest to those of European races. They are passionately fond of music; and although as an art it has not been developed to any extent among them, yet it forms a great feature in their lives. They are very fond of introducing songs into their stories, and these verses, sung by the story-teller, always form the crowning part of the tale for both listener and narrator. Often the story is short, consisting of but a few words, and is told simply as a setting for the long, monotonous song.

One of the best localities for studying the negro, better, perhaps, in many respects, than the African continent, is the island of Jamaica of the West Indies.

At an early date the negroes, mostly from the Guinea coast, were carried by the Genoese, Spaniards, and English to the island of Jamaica, and here they have remained unmolested, save for the period of bondage from slavery, and have been left undisturbed to live their lives, practise their customs, and develop their institutions more naturally and simply than in those localities of Africa where a perverted European civilization has left its corrupting influence on native life and customs.

Slave trade was abolished in 1807; and since the emancipation of the slaves in Jamaica, August 1, 1834, the negroes have led a particularly natural and simple life.

Among the many curious and interesting native customs there is none more interesting, one might say *thrilling*, to the foreigner than the "sit up," so called by them, or wake, held around the hut of a dead or dying friend.

When a negro is known to be dead or at the point of death, at sundown his friends, men, women, and children, collect in his hut or about the door, to give him a "sit up," and under the flickering light of a bonfire sit all the night through, singing and chanting slow dirges. Each person present takes some part in the singing, — apparently selecting the time and tune as his spirit moves him, without regard for the laws of harmony, — chanting to a vociferous accompaniment of groans and wails of lamentation. A more grim or grotesque spectacle cannot be imagined, or music more discordant and weird.

Give the imagination full play, and the dusky faces, contorted by simulated grief, the minor discords and monotony of the chanting, the moans from the dying soul, the wails from the mourners, — all

this carried on through the long, dark hours of the night, under the fitful firelight, will conjure up more grim fancies than even the strongest mind could deem agreeable.

When a negro becomes civilized and Christianized up to a certain point he considers himself above this heathenish custom, and looks with no small degree of scorn upon those of his brothers who still cling to it as a soul-saving rite. There are many most interesting phases in the character development of the civilized and Christianized negro, which make us smile at the substitution of one saving ceremony for another, and this conventional custom for that, and make us wonder if, aside from certain cruel and barbaric practices, the washed and dressed negro is any better off than his simpler brother who has not met with European refinements. Unless civilization go hand in hand with the simple and direct Christian "thou shalts" and "shalt nots," the negro is certainly the worse for it, and worse if his Christianity be a perverted one.

Negroes, on becoming somewhat familiar with the English language, will drop, as far as possible, characteristic native words, and use English equivalents. They have a love for long words, and these they use without regard for the real meaning. Often they will coin a long word to suit the occasion, if wishing to appear particularly correct. My father once, asking a negro about the health of his brother, received this answer: "My br'er great valetudinarian, sa." He meant to convey the idea that his brother was a little indisposed or ailing.

There are many proverbs current among the negroes which correctly reflect the negro thought and character. Such epigrammatic expressions as: "Too much hurry no good," "Greedy choke puppy," and others of this sort, are in constant use among them.[1]

The quaint, indirect, and suggestive way the negro has of expressing his ideas is delightfully original and witty. On being accused of falsehood they say: "Me mout' miss," and one old fellow, being asked his age, replied: "Me 'bout half t'ro', sah."

In conversation and story-telling they use as few words as possible, omitting articles, connectives, and all words not necessary to convey the idea. This conciseness, rather than being the result of clear and careful thought, is, of course, the result of primitive ideas. The natural instinct and desire for expression, simply, is gratified, with little comprehension of the meaning and uses of language.

One of the most amusing language fashions of the negroes is that of pluralizing some words by prefixing the "s" instead of adding it, and saying, for instance, "spill" instead of "pills," and "spin"

[1] For a list of negro sayings and proverbs see *Journal of American Folk-Lore* for January–March, 1896.

for "pins," and "spain" for "pains." This they do when wishing to appear particularly learned.

The negroes are painfully superstitious, and people the night with ghosts and spirits, or "duppies," as they call them. They have an intense fear of the dead, and a graveyard holds untold horrors for them, particularly at night. In their funeral rites they go through the most absurd performances, pretending to follow instructions given by the spirit of their dead friend. This is done to establish friendly relations between themselves and the spirit of the departed friend, that they may not be visited or bewitched by it. Every conceivable demon or spirit may be found in the train of "duppies," that are such a terror to the poor negro; and what they term their "ghost stories" contain the most terrifying pictures that can be conjured up by an imaginative and fearful brain. Notwithstanding their fear of ghosts, the negroes are very fond of gathering in parties, in the evening, — men, women, and children, — to sit around a fire and tell "duppy story."

The narrator is usually some old toothless "granny," and it is no wonder that the "picknys" dare not look behind them for fear of "duppies," and are afraid to go in the dark to their little beds.

Perhaps the greatest superstitious fear that possesses the negro is the fear of Obeahism, or Obeah, as it is usually called on the island. It is difficult to understand whether their fear is given to Obi as a fancied personage and spirit of evil, or to Obeahism as a practice, founded on the influence and activity of evil spirits. The Obeah-men, those supposed to understand and practise this witchcraft, are engaged to break and counteract the evil spells of Obeah, and to heal sickness that is the result of enchantment, as well as to perpetrate the most evil deeds of injury and revenge.

The instruments with which the Obeah-men pretend to work their art are bones, feathers, blood, bits of glass, and particularly grave dust. The greatest secrecy is always observed in these practices, giving rise to acts of the greatest lawlessness. Even at the present day Obeahism is not unknown, and as a "black art," with its attendant evils, is a most interesting study.

There are most hideous stories of cannibalism lurking about the island, and it is probable that this horrible custom was practised in the early slavery days.

The stories of "Man Mary" may still be heard; and although the exact personality of this creation cannot be distinctly gotten at, it is without doubt true that he is a relic of an old-time fear of cannibalism. It is told that a large black man is sometimes met in the woods and lonely places, gathering herbs and earthworms, which he uses for making soup. He is no other than "Man Mary," who

chases children when they pass his way, and who eats them if he catches them. My old nurse has told me of many an exciting journey past Man Mary's hut, and of hair-breadth escapes from his boiling soup kettle.

Of all the folk-stories to be met with on the island, those most characteristic and most easily collected and understood are the "Anansi Stories," or "Nancy Stories," as they are usually called by the natives. Of these Anansi is the hero, and he is represented both as a human being and as a spider, while at all times he possesses the wiles and subtle craft of the spider. When my childish curiosity would make me push this point with my negro narrator and inquire: "But was it Anansi the *man* or Anansi the *spider?*" she would give me this reasonable and convincing reply: "Chuh, chil'! yo' too poppesha! It was Nancy, jus' Nancy, yo' see."

In Jamaica the spider commonly called Anansi is the large black house spider that is to be met with everywhere on the island. However, every spider is spoken of as "Nancy" and their webs as "Nancy webs."

"Death" is Anansi's brother, and it is probable this relationship was fancied through the relation of death with the poisonous sting of the tarantula and other spiders common in the tropics.

"Takuma" is Anansi's wife, and a stupid sort of creature she seems to be, without wit or any positive characteristics. Her character has doubtless been conceived and established through the worthlessness of the spider for purposes of food or clothing, or any use of primitive man.

Takuma is Anansi's only wife, and it is an interesting fact that, although the Africans have always been polygamists, they give but one wife to the heroes of their fairy-tales, and decry the custom of polygamy in their higher laws.

Anansi is represented as engaged in deeds of benevolence as well as mischief, which the stories to follow will show.

It is a significant fact that observation taught the African, as it did the Greek, to invest the spider with attributes and make a human creature of it; but the superior intelligence of the Greek gave rise to the beautiful little story of Arachne, and how the arts of weaving were taught to man by the cunningly woven fabric of the spider's web, while the inferior perceptions of the African taught him to see only the wiles and craft of a poisonous creature he feared.

In some of the so-called "Nancy stories" Anansi does not figure, and in some he figures or not according to the pleasure of the narrator. Many of the stories in general favor with the natives are

rambling and without point, and their charm and attraction for the negro mind seems to rest in repetition and a sort of metrical jingle.

Often touches of beauty, and sometimes a certain nobility, are to be found in these folk-stories, but the characteristic touch is a lively and boisterous wit and humor that is a general and important factor in the composition of the negro.

ANANSI AND THE LADY IN THE WELL.

On asking my negro nurse for just one more Anansi story she would reply: "Yo' chil', yo'! yo' greedy fo' Nancy story. Listen now, den."

Once it was a time w'en der was a good queen. An' she have husban' an' one pretty pickny. An' she have one little pet daag, who go trot, trot, all 'bout de house after her.

Now de husban' he t'ink nutten 'tall of him wife, an' he say to himse'f. "I put dat queen down de ole well, and den I get 'n'er mo' b'u'ful queen." Den he do dis same t'ing w'at he t'ink in him ole black heart.

Now de queen she fall way down to de bottom of de well an' she can't scrummel out no way, an' jus' sit all de day and cry fo' her pickny. By an' by Nancy he come scrape, scrape, crup, crup, down de side de well an' say: "Howdy! W'at fo' yo' cry, me lahdy?"

De queen say: "Howdy, Nancy! Me cry fo' me pickny."

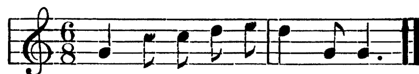
"Jus' jump on me back," say Nancy, "an' I fetch yo' out dat well."

He tek de queen on him back and go scrape, scrape, crup, crup, up de side de well. Den he say: —

"Now run! wash de pickny, an' me fetch yo' down de well 'gain befo' yo' husban' catch yo'."

Den she run to de do' an' sing: —

An' de little daag sing :—



Den she sing 'gain : —

An' de little daag sing : —

An' so till all de t'ings fetched an' de pickny all wash, dress, an' sleep so sweet. Den she run back to Nancy an' he tek her on him back an' go scrape, scrape, crup, crup, back down de well 'gain. An' ev'ry day Nancy come dis way and say : "Howdy, me lahdy!" and tek de queen on him back an' fetch her out de well, an' she wash an' dress dat pickny till him grow big bwai.

In telling this story the narrator will often sing for each article of the baby's toilette, and sing the reply of the dog, in the simple measures given above.

The following story is particularly characteristic, and full of the quaint phrases and idioms common among the negroes : —

THE FORGOTTEN WIFE.

Once it was a time an' der was a King Tonga and a Queen Fuffoo, an' dey have t'ree pickaninnies. King Tonga say he take him cutlas an' go to 'n'ur lan', an' fetch home nice t'ings fo' Fuffoo an' de spickny. Fuffoo give him little daag, an' she say : —

"Yo', Tonga, me husban', yo' na let daag kiss yo' face, fo' den yo' na nuh yo' have wife an' t'ree spickny."

Tonga he go clup, clop, clup, clop on him mule down de road, an' he came to a house, an' it 'pears like to be some king's house. Der is a mos' b'u'ful princess inside, an' den de little daag kiss Tonga face, an' he done forgot Fuffoo an' de pickaninnies.

Tonga stay wi' de princess, an' den dey say dey guine marry nex' week. Nancy he hear 'bout dis, an' go sidlin' roun' to Fuffoo an' say : —

"'Pears like yo' husban' guine marry princess, Fuffoo. What fo' yo' stay here an' min' pickney?"

"Me na nuh, Nancy. Me gone now." An' Fuffoo run down de road to fin' Tonga.

She come to princess house an fin' house all hullaballoo. She ask what mek all noise fo'. An cle granny come out an' say : —

"Deh-deh, deh-deh, me sweet missis! T'ree spot come on King Tonga shirt an' der no one can wash dem clean."

Den Fuffoo say : "Gi' me de shirt, an' me wash it clean. Yo' wi' see."

An' she tek it to de spring an wash de t'ree spot till it all white 'gain. Den she go at night to King Tonga window an' sing : —

An' Tonga say: "Who sing under me window? Me na nuh dat pusson, but 'pears like me nuh dat voice."

An' de nex' night Fuffoo go 'gain an' sing:—

An' Tonga say: "Me nuh dat voice! Bring dat pusson here."

An' when Fuffoo come inside he 'member her an' de t'ree pickaninnies, an' den he know de daag mus' have kiss him face.

Here is one of those never-ending and, to us, pointless tales, which seem to possess a peculiar charm for the negro, and which he is particularly fond of telling:—

DINNER READY?

Massa came doun road on him mule.

Bwai say: "Howdy, massa!"

Massa say: "T'ank yo', bwai. Dinner ready?"

"Yes, sah."

Clup, clop, clup, clop, clup, clop, clup, clop.

"Dinner ready, dinner ready?"

"Yes, sah; yes, sah."

Clup, clop, clup, clop, clup, clop, clup, clop.

"Dinner ready, dinner ready?"

"Yes, sah; yes, sah."

Here there will be a scarcely perceptible pause, and the narrator will continue:—

"Howdy, massa!"

"T'ank yo', bwai. Dinner ready?"

"Yes, sah."

Clup, clop, clup, clop, clup, clop, clup, clop.

"Dinner ready, dinner ready?"
"Yes, sah; yes, sah."
Clup, clop, clup, clop, clup, clop, clup, clop.
"Dinner ready, dinner ready?"
"Yes, sah; yes, sah."

This story can be continued indefinitely, and usually is spun out in a measured jog-trot sort of time, until the pickaninnies show signs of weariness and become uneasy for something new.

The following is the story of how Anansi met his end, and as a bit of negro creation is unsurpassed.

THE END OF ANANSI.

Nancy an' him br'er De't' dey bot' hab a p'ovis'on fiel'. Now Nancy and De't' dey a'ways in some qua'l, do (though) Nancy a'ways roun' smilin'. Nancy he like sit under him bamboo tree like he was busher (overseer) an' no work in him p'ovis'on fiel', so, course, den, him yam an' beans no grow. But Br'er De't' him tote de hoe all day an' smack him mout' over him yam an' beans. Nancy he tell him wife, Takuma, he guine by night wi' basket to p'ovis'on fiel' of De't', jus' to taste him yam an' beans. He tell Takuma to stan' at de do' wi' basket, an' when he run in wi' basket of yam she gi' him basket fo' de beans.

Takuma say: "Duppies catch yo', me husban'!"

Nancy say: "Chuh! Me na nuh duppie. Me buckra (white man) dis night."

Now Br'er De't' t'ink it 'pears like some one take him yam an' beans, an' he stan' by night wi' cutlas to catch t'ief. By an' by it 'pears like he see Nancy wi' basket in him fiel', an' he say: —

"Howdy, Br'er Nancy," an' Nancy say: "Howdy, Br'er De't', me jus' so-so."

"What mek yo' out dis time night in me p'ovis'on fiel'?"

"Me like watch yo' yam grow, Br'er De't'."

"Yo' mout' miss, Nancy; but what fo' yo' carry basket?"

"Me fetch crayfish, Br'er De't'."

"Yo' t'ief," say De't', an' he fly at Nancy wi' him cutlas.

Nancy he run an' he call to Takuma away down de road: "Open back do', syut f'ont do', De't'-a come!"

An' Takuma say: "What yo' say, me husban', bring basket?"

Nancy say: "Oh, yo' ole fool yo'! Open back do', syut f'ont do', De't'-a come!"

"What yo' say, me husban', bring basket?"

"Oh, yo' ole fool yo'! Open back do', syut f'ont do', De't'-a c-o-o-o-me!"

An' De't' he run, an' mos' catch Nancy, an' mos' hit him wi' him cutlas, when Nancy he jus' run to de ole shed roun' de house, an' he run right up de wall like de big black spider, an' he hide himse'f, an' Br'er De't' he can't find him no how. An' dat 's why, me chil', yo' a'ways finds Nancy an' him webs in ole sheds an' dem places.

It has always been of interest to me to know that the greater part of the Anansi stories told me by my negro nurse were told to her by her grandmother, an African princess, who was stolen, when a child, from Guinea by Spanish slave traders, and sold as a slave in the Island of Jamaica.

Buckra. White man, or white people.
Busher. Overseer.
Bwai. Boy.
Deh-deh, deh-deh. What a negro woman says when dropping a courtesy to a superior.
Duppy. A ghost or spirit.
Howdy. How do you do,
Me gone. I am going.
Me na nuh. Me not know, or I do not know.
Min' pickny. Mind children, or take care of children.
Mout'. Mouth.
Nutten. Nothing.
Pickny, pickaninny. Child. The negroes say "pickny" commonly, but "pickaninny" when wishing to speak particularly correctly.
Poppesha. Foolish, stupid.
P'ovis'on fiel'. Provision field, or small farm.
So-so. Pretty well, or not in the best of health.
Syut. Shut.
Yo' na. You must not, or you do not.

Ada Wilson Trowbridge.

KENILWORTH, ILL.